

## DAWSON COUNTY - AT 99 YEARS OLD, MILDRED HEATH STILL CAN'T ESCAPE NINE-TO-FIVE

*"The reason why I'm working is I just feel like I'm needed. I know how to do it and I just enjoy the work. But then I enjoy anything I do."*

It's no wonder Mildred Heath stays so young.

She's never stopped working.

At 99-years-old, she still working at the business she helped establish 69 years go. She's given some thought to retiring, but, as Mildred says, "I've tried to quit but they won't let me. There's too much to do."

This journalist extraordinaire has been going to work at the Beacon-Observer in Overton since 1938, ever since Mildred and her husband started the newspaper. She still works 30 hours a week -- two full days a week and in between. "I've worked from 8:30 in the morning until six o'clock," she says of her busier days.

The roots of Mildred's work ethics reach as far back as 1883, when her Norwegian grandparents came from Kansas to Frontier County to homestead. Her father was the first Ford salesman in the county and was instrumental in starting the school in Curtis. He liked the diversity of the area and used it to his advantage. "We always did well, even in bad times," Mildred recalls. "But he had a lot of things going. (My parents) planted fruit trees and all kinds of trees, so I grew up with that. We worked awfully hard back in those days, but we worked together and enjoyed each other."

She started dating her future husband, Blair Heath, while a freshman at Curtis High School. He wasn't the only one that had his eye on this alluring beauty. "I had three boys ask me out for a date," she says in girlish delight, "but I'd already promised my husband that I'd go out with him so I kept my promise."

The two married after college. Blair wanted to teach, but teaching required more college courses than he wanted to invest time in. Having always been interested in journalism, he went to work at the Farnam Echo in 1923. Mildred went to work there, too, and learned to set type on the tedious Linotype. "(The paper) got a Linotype keyboard from back east somewhere," she says of the early typesetter.

The Linotype was a one-man machine that was introduced about 1886. As the name implied, the machine produced a solid 'line of type'. Having adjusted the machine for the required line length and point size, the metal heated to a temperature of about 550 degrees Fahrenheit and the setting could commence. It was a wearisome process, yet a modern upgrade from the former method of hot lead. "Hot lead was dangerous. I got burned a lot of times when it splashed on me," Mildred adds.

IN 1927 THE young couple purchased the Farnam Echo. "My husband never thought about teaching after that. He was always interested in journalism and really good at it. It would be hard to make a living in a small town if you didn't have a lot of ability, and he did. We went through drought and depression and made it. I think the only reason we were able to was we just went without."

Most of the responsibility of getting the newspaper out was left up to Mildred for several months when Blair fell ill to a critical thyroid condition. Plus, she also had the care of their little daughter.

"I just figured the Lord just brought us through. I didn't think much about it at the time, but now I look back and see I did things I'd never done before. I was the everything in the paper. We never had more than one employee. Sometimes we didn't even have one," she chuckles. "I had someone help out when my husband was sick, but some of the time I was just alone or I'd get a youngster to help. We always had a youngster around, a lot of them would just clean up."

Writer ... photographer ... composer ... layout person and even janitor. Mildred filled all the roles alongside her husband except mechanic. "My husband always did the repairing of the machines. He was handy at that, too."

Even when money was tight, they never failed to add the personal small-town touch so familiar to their newspaper: "When we were at war, we sent papers to all the soldiers that were from the community. That was a lot of work because the records changed so much."

After ten years of publishing the Echo, the Heath family moved to Overton in 1938 and established a newspaper there. "It was a nice small town with nice people and there wasn't a paper. My husband named it the Overton Observer. It wasn't easy to start a paper. We had competition from out of town, but we made it. Then ten years later, in 1948, we bought the Elm Creek paper," located eight miles east of Overton.

From the ingenious progress of Linotype to computer, Mildred has watched inventions emerge that she never imagined possible. "I set type on the first computer we got, but then they changed so much I couldn't follow it. As far as digital photography, I think it's amazing. We used to have to send our pictures to another town miles away to be engraved. Now we do all the layout on the computer and just e-mail the pages to the printer."

Eventually, the Heath's and their daughter Polly and her husband, Norman Taylor, merged the Overton and Elm Creek papers in 1972, renaming the newspaper the Beacon-Observer. All three of their children had newspaper in their blood and helped with the business at one time or another. Mildred's husband and three daughters are now deceased. Her last living daughter passed away in early 2007 at the age of 73. Mildred's son-in-law, Norman Taylor, has taken over as editor and publisher for the last 38 years. He knows the business well, having worked at the Beacon-Observer since high school. Mildred's granddaughter, Gail Johnson, maintains the offices and also helps her dad and grandmother. The weekly paper is published every Thursday and serves the communities of Amherst, Eddyville, Elm Creek, Loomis, Miller, Odessa, Overton, Pleasanton, Riverdale and Sumner.

The paper is alive with news and photos of events centering around the people in the communities, sports photos and stats covering each event, weddings and anniversaries, locals from each community brought in each week through faithful correspondents, and all the essential coverage. It's what the Beacon staff does best -- recognizing what's important to the people that make up the communities.

Norm has won numerous awards for his writing and photography, especially in the area of sports. Frequently received thank you notes cover a portion of a wall in the office with comments such as the one from a Lakewood, Colorado subscriber: Dear Norman and staff, Thank you so much for putting together a great small-town newspaper year in and year out. I sure do appreciate all you do to (help us) stay connected.

"I talked with a friend a while back who grew up here. She said people just long for something from back home," Mildred adds.

IF YOU ASKED this 99-year-old Dawson County wonder why she drives her electric scooter each morning from her house in Overton to the familiar office on main street, she would simply

reply: "The reason why I'm working is I just feel like I'm needed. I know how to do it and I enjoy the work. But then I enjoy anything I do," she says with a sparkle in her grin. "People are always telling me I don't look the age I am. I'll be 100 on January 4, 2008."

She does admit she'd like to have a little more time to get things done at home, but when the publisher is out covering an event, she is often the only one in the office. "We had a gal that came in to help when I fractured my hip a while back. And when I came back to work the calendars had never even been changed. They still had the same date on them from the day I left."

Health wise, Mildred's only complaint is a "little arthritis" in her knees. She attributes her fitness and longevity to "knowing how to work and enjoying the work, and my Christian faith to back it up."

When Mildred turned 90, she received a press award for being the oldest worker. That was almost ten years ago. Today, Mildred, along with her son-in-law and granddaughter, are still making sure the hometown news is delivered to the heart and home of every subscriber.

"There's just the three of us that work here," she says with the same pioneer spirit that started the community newspaper almost seven decades ago. "But I'm the oldest one," she grins.

\* Workers between the ages of 50 and 79 make up over 25% of the labor force in Nebraska. As our population and work force ages, older workers are increasingly desired as employees, according to the Department of Health and Human Services (HSS). \*Taken from a news release from Nebraska Health and Human Services System dated September 15, 2005